

Corona Club, reminiscences by Dora Eldredge,
as told to Maxine Durney 10-9-89.

Those women who got together to form Corona Club all had good educations, but were tied down by the chickens their husbands were raising, by the eggs that needed to be gathered and packed. They wanted something else. They wanted a literary club. Corona was a new community just starting out, this was 1902 or so, and the women all were young.

The club grew in numbers, and in time was too large a group to meet in any one's home.

My Aunt May and Uncle Chris Schlake lived on Corona Road, and had an orchard there. Aunt May came home in tears one time from a meeting of the club, said they didn't know what to do, there was no place to meet. I guess Uncle Chris was moved by the tears because he said, "Why don't you build a hall. We'll give the Club a piece of land, a corner of the orchard, a piece 60 by 40 feet."

I don't know who designed it, but I think all the husbands helped to build it. The Petaluma Merchants heard about it, and said, "We helped the Women's Club in town to build their clubhouse, we'll now be asked by these Corona women to do the same." But Corona Club never asked. They sewed, gave dinners, they raised the money themselves.

These women who started the club stepped out to help others, sometimes families were hungry.. They took food, helped in different ways.

Anyone who belonged to Corona Club gained by it. The club was good for the community. During the wars they sewed, wrapped bandages, how they worked!

I am a Schlake through my mother. It was my aunt May who vouched for me when I came to Petaluma in the fifties and she wanted me to join Corona Club. The membership was held to fifty, one couldn't join unless someone dropped out or died. Later they changed it to sixty members.

I never regretted joining. And now I think those women who formed the club and built the clubhouse should be honored.

PETALUMA HISTORICAL MUSEUM
Oral History Program

Their building is the last still standing...Penngrove, Cotati, Lakeville, all have disappeared. I am going to ask the Mayor of Petaluma - I know her - to do what Nancy Bauer of the Museum has suggested. That would be to buy the clubhouse from us remaining members, and move it to the Fairgrounds in Petaluma, where the city would like to have a reception and information center. It would be just the right size.

If it stays where it is the new road will come so close to it that it will have to be razed. Its well built...it can be moved. It would be an honor to those women.

Ladies of the club call it quits

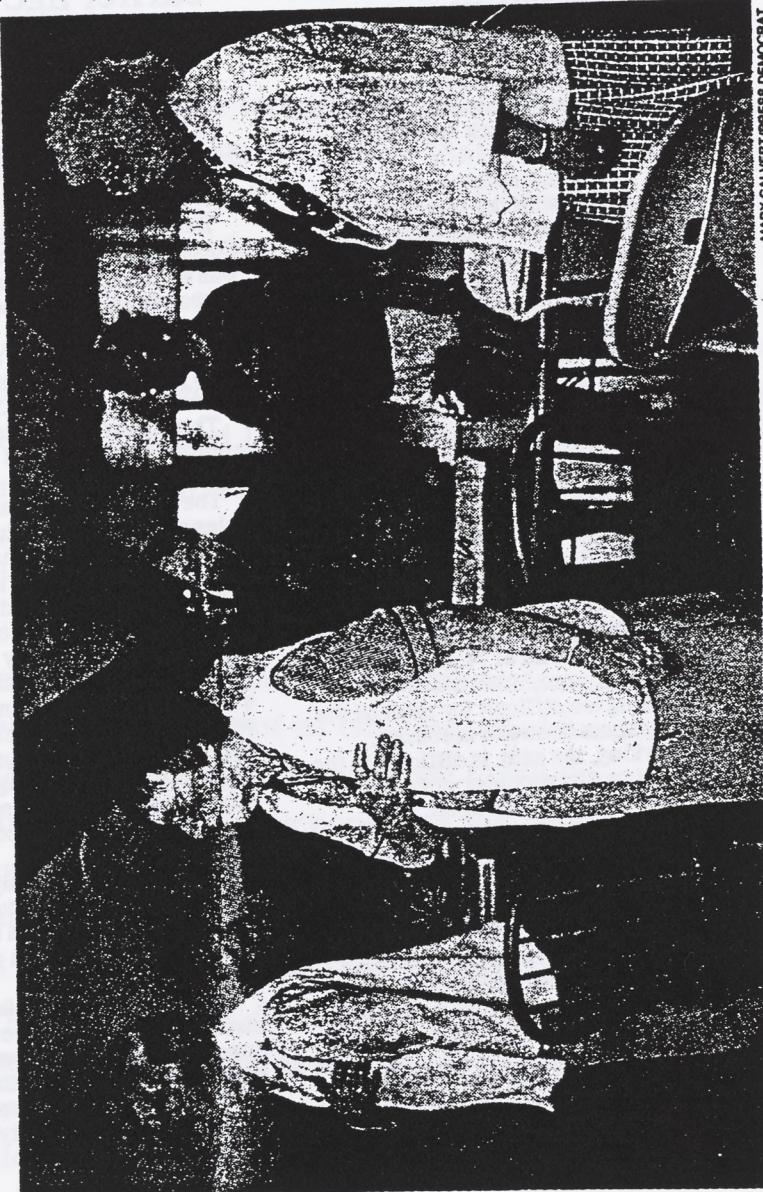
Modern times
catch up with
rural tradition

BY MEG MCNAHEY
Staff Writer

PETALUMA — At 12:30 p.m., they began to arrive, just as they had every other Wednesday without fail since 1902.

They spent their morning preparing hot dishes, fancy Jell-O salad, homemade rolls and lemon meringue pie. They placed phone calls to find out who is coming and who is ailing — and who is just too tired to leave the house. They selected canned goods from the pantry for the bingo game and wrapped them like shower gifts in flowered paper with ribbons.

And they remembered to bring the paper for the one-hole privy outside, the plastic utensils, the paper plates and disposable cups. For now the clubhouse is bare. There are no supplies kept in the cupboards. Gone are the linens, the china, the Depression glass. For the first time, maybe in the 87-year history of the Corona Literary and Social Club, no one picked flowers from the garden for the luncheon table. All the vases were recently sold for petty change, along with almost everything else in the club.



MARY CALVERT/PRESS DEMOCRAT

Members of the Corona Literary and Social Club stand together for the last time to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

country ladies of Petaluma's meandering northeast corner of hay farms and chicken ranches. It's a landscape that by next year will begin to disappear under asphalt, concrete curbs,

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They are the ladies of the club, bonded by hundreds, thousands of Wednesday afternoons spent in polite conversation over country suppers and civilized games of cards.

They were the farm wives and

Including the piano, rocking chair and settee.

The ladies stepped out of their cars slowly, a little sadly, for this was to be the last day they would make the ritual journey to the Corona Club.

Club

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traffic lights and the foundations of more than 2,000 homes. The 670 acres bounded by Corona and Ely roads are the city's next development frontier, with 35 percent of municipal development expected to occur there over the next 20 years.

As the ladies pulled up to the club last Wednesday, they passed surveyors preparing for the improvements that will widen part of Corona, cut a major thoroughfare through the farmland and create a whole new intersection not far from the club.

City officials carefully planned the annexation and development to preserve the two-room clubhouse,

built from chicken pie dinners and pin money back in 1925. After all, the Corona Club is an eastside institution. But its members know it's also an anachronism.

"It isn't like it used to be. Everybody's old. No one new is coming in," sighed Freda Beffa, 82, who joined in 1944.

Ladies at one time had to be asked to join the sorority, which boasted as many as 60 proud members. Pledges had to "pass inspection" and be elected by secret ballot. Those were the rules, though few, if any, were ever turned away.

According to some members, the Corona Clubbers, unlike many of the town ladies who joined the snootier women's clubs, were much too friendly to hurt anyone's feelings.

But now the type of young and middle-aged women who kept the

club going for so many decades and who guaranteed its future, have careers, kids to carpool and aerobics classes to squeeze in. They don't have time or the inclination to play cards or talk about roses on a weekday afternoon.

"Women of the earlier age had other interests," said senior member Emily Kelsey, 96, who rode up in a horse and buggy to her first meeting back in 1915 as a bride of 21.

The membership roster, smudged with the penciled-out names of ladies who have passed on, now lists about 25. Fourteen made it to last week's meeting.

"I came today because I just made up my mind to," said Velma Bryan, who is 81 and has been ill for the past several months.

A member for nearly 50 years, Bryan said she was dismayed to enter the clubhouse and for the first time see it empty.

"I felt bad about it. I can't help it," she said, smiling to conceal the moisture around her eyes. "I had so many good times here and yet I know it's the thing to do."

Pete Millmeister, a relative newcomer and at 74, one of "the younger ones," said it was just getting too difficult for most of the members to attend meetings. Parking, she said, is difficult in the narrow dirt shoulder of Corona. And the clubhouse itself, she added, is drafty, with only a wood-burning stove — since sold — and no indoor restroom. Meetings have dwindled to only once, instead of twice a month.

Millmeister said the upcoming annexation and development gave members, reluctant to let go of a lifetime tradition, a good reason to call it quits.

Several months ago they began selling off the furnishings. Now only a few stray earrings, some puzzles, chipped china and the clubhouse itself, remain to be sold. Dora Eldredge, a onetime Old Adobe School Board trustee and member for nearly 40 years, is storing all the pictures, mementos and club records, including the deed to the property, for donation to the Petaluma Museum.

The club is among the last of its kind in the area. One by one, neighboring country ladies clubs in Penngrove, Cotati and Lakeville disbanded.

"Women of the earlier age had other interests."

**EMILY KELSEY, 96,
CLUB MEMBER SINCE 1915**

But in its halcyon days the Corona Literary and Social Club was a little haven from kids, husbands and the humdrum of farm chores.

It was, said Kelsey, "a place to go . . . a place to talk about books and pictures and sculpture."

There were garden talks, nighttime potlucks and book reports.

The ladies put on charity food sales and brought in "their machines" to sew for the war effort during the World War.

"Some days we would have a skit. One day we brought in baby pictures and everybody had to guess who they were," said Kelsey, a sharp nonagenarian in a wheelchair. "Or we stuck our feet out from behind curtains and had to guess who they belonged to. One day we wore our wedding dresses. It was just a general good get-together."

There were no such hijinks Wednesday. Members dutifully saluted the flag, heard a treasurer's report and an update on efforts to sell the building.

City officials said the assessment district for the soon-to-be-built Sonoma Mountain Parkway probably will purchase the 1/10-acre lot and turn the clubhouse over to the city for recreation or historical preservation if possible.

Club members say they will continue to get together informally as often as possible. But even Kelsey, who has attended faithfully for 74 years, says that the club is already history.

"It's a part of my life that's past," she said matter-of-factly. "But I'll miss the ladies."

**TWA alters policy
of 'frequent flier'**